



**CITY OF LARKSPUR
Staff Report**

September 9, 2021
Parks & Recreation Commission Meeting

DATE: September 9, 2021
TO: PRC Commissioners Koepfel, Blauvelt, Friedel, Harrison and Sunshine
FROM: Rita Schoch, Public Works Administrative Analyst II
Julian Skinner, Public Works Director
SUBJECT: Dolliver Park Playground Modifications (Part 2)

ACTION REQUESTED

Receive staff update and recommend staff continue with preconstruction efforts for a new play area at Dolliver Park specifically for children under five year old.

SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

At the July 29, 2021, special meeting, staff presented the PRC commission with a proposed project to create a play area designed specifically for children under 5 within the current footprint of the Dolliver Park playground.

The opportunity for this project was made possible due to a donation proposal from a private Larkspur family. The donors initially approached staff with an offer to fund the purchase of play equipment after personally experiencing that their children, ages one and three, had few opportunities to play independently on the play structures currently in the playground. Staff made multiple field visits to the playground and, without exception, observed parents and caretakers awkwardly assisting their young children in playing on equipment designed for much older children. Staff interacted with the adults on these occasions and was repeatedly told that “there’s nothing for small kids to play on here” and, in their opinion, the proposed creation of a play area for specifically for younger children was a “fantastic idea.”

Receiving recommendation from the PRC to proceed with public engagement, staff commenced with an survey to gauge park users’ interest in the creation of a new Tot Zone play area.

DISCUSSION

Survey Promotion and Collection

Staff designed an online survey (Attachment 1) with the goal of reaching Dolliver Park users to understand how they currently use the park and their appetite for the proposed project. The survey consisted of nine questions with an estimated completion time of less than five minutes. Staff elected to proceed with five survey collection methods (Attachment 2):

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- 1) a survey invitation was emailed to ninety-eight families who registered their elementary school children, with an age range of five to twelve, for the 2021 Super School Summer School run by Larkspur's Recreation Department;
- 2) a link to the survey was published on the Dolliver Park project page on the City's website;
- 3) public notices with links to the online survey were posted at the three designated City locations – the community boards at the front porch of City Hall, the Bon Air Center, and the Marin Country Mart;
- 4) the same public notices were posted at various locations throughout the Dolliver playground area and on the doors to the public restrooms;
- 5) and for citizens who chose not to or couldn't participate electronically, hard copies of the survey were made available at the Larkspur Library. The public notices included instructions on where to get the hard copy survey.

The survey covered two main topics. The first series of questions covered basic demographics and asked how families currently use the Dolliver playground. The second part of the survey provided information about the specifics of the proposed project and then asked for feedback on each aspect.

Survey Results

The survey was open and available for participation for a three-week period, starting August 8 and closing on September 7, 2021. A total of ninety-three people participated in the survey – approximately 25% from the emailed summer school database list; approximately 75% from the public noticing at the park; and less than 1% from hard copies at the library and official City public noticing locations. The survey results are summarized in Attachment 3.

Approximately two-thirds of the survey participants indicated they visited the Dolliver playground several times or more a month, with 98% saying they were accompanied by their children. These children were represented ages from under two to over thirteen years old, indicating a healthy sampling of families so as not to skew toward those wanting, or not wanting, a play area for children under the age of five.

Participants were then asked what their children enjoyed doing at the playground. The results showed the kids liked the following activities:

- 70% - to play near the creek, trees or just hanging out
- 70% - swings
- 58% - large play structure
- 42% - ground spinner
- 21% - metal climber

Then, participants were shown examples of new play equipment that was being considered for the Tot Zone. When asked to choose between two play structures, there was a clear preference for the all-wood structure (62%) versus a structure composed of steel posts and HDPE plastic panels (7%). To avoid skew-potential questioning (i.e. pushing survey-takers to make a choice toward particularly favored answers), a "I don't like either" answer option was available, resulting in 11% of the votes.

In addition to the play structures, participants were also asked to weigh five options for ancillary play pieces. There were two clear favorites, stepping pods and an all-wood playhouse. Their second favorites were a piece that looks like a fallen log and a bridge climber. Again, skew-potential survey questioning was avoided by providing an option of "I don't like any of these" which was selected by just 4% of the participants.

A potential friction point for this project was the issue of the existing metal climber. Participants were shown an illustration of how removing the metal climber was needed to create space for the Tot Zone and were simply asked:

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How do you feel about replacing the existing metal climber to create a dedicated Tot Play Zone for children under 5? (check one of the dots below)

create new Tot Play Zone I'm neutral keep the Climber

The results showed 61% chose “Create the Tot Zone,” 18% said to “Keep the Climber,” and 21% were neutral on the topic. The takeaway is that close to two-thirds of the survey participants were definitely in favor of removing the climber and if the neutral votes were included, then clear majority or 79% were in support of the Tot Zone at the expense of the climber’s removal. Recalling the previously discussed survey result of only 21% of children liking to use the climber, this further lent support for the decision to remove the climber.

The need and reasons for safety fencing to contain the proposed Tot Zone was then presented. It was stated as a non-negotiable necessity for the project to move forward rather than a choice. Three options for fencing design were presented and participants could choose one or all preferred options. Of the three designs, the wire mesh fence was somewhat favored over a wattle fence or the split rail & wire mesh designs. Recognizing that this was a potentially emotional topic, an optional comments box was made available, and 9 comments were submitted. There was one emphatic “no fence” response while the other 8 responses had more of a resigned “if you must” tone or suggestions on the look and feel of the fence.

In recognition that all the previous survey questions drilled down into specifics, the last question was a “step back and see the big picture” query. Survey takers were asked “Overall, are you in favor of or opposed to this project?” For full transparency, this question was added after twenty-three responses were already submitted, however of the sixty-four responses collected once the question was added, 84% were in favor of the project and 6% were neutral. Only 9% of the responses were a hard no and were opposed to the project.

Survey Conclusions

By carefully reviewing and interpreting survey results, staff believes that the survey captured a reasonable sampling of citizens that regularly visit Dolliver Park and have an interest in changes (or no changes) to the park. Staff is also confident that a broad age range of children were represented in the survey and the results are well balanced. Overall, the project goal of creating a Tot Zone was heavily supported by the survey takers despite the necessity of removing an existing piece of play equipment. The necessity of fencing around the Tot Zone was accepted and staff will continue to review and assess fencing design before selection of the least obtrusive design. Finally, staff concurs with the public’s desire that any new play equipment have a natural look that blends in with the unique, woodland setting of Dolliver Park and avoid anything that has artificial, overly urban or plastic aesthetic. Also, color selection should also be equally mindful.

Preliminary Design

Based on the feedback and findings of the survey, staff concludes that there is public interest and support for an addition of a new Tot Zone play area for designed specifically for children under five years of age that will be incorporated within the footprint of the existing Dolliver Park playground.

Working with the donor and play equipment manufacturers, staff developed a preliminary design for the new Tot Zone. This design incorporates play equipment made from actual wood or materials that mimic a wood look and feel. The use of plastic is limited to slides and a few play panels. The color palette purposely avoids bright primary colors and skews toward natural and/or earth tones.

The preliminary design includes a main play structure with slides and climbers, as well as secondary pieces including a playhouse, two panels, stepping pods and a climb-thru log. It should be noted that the current

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design is still preliminary and includes all the bells and whistles. Over the next several weeks and months, as project costs are fine-tuned, the design will most likely be pared down to keep within the donor's desired budget. However, the final design will be similar in terms basic design, visuals, and aesthetics.

Once the final design has been prepared and prior to soliciting bids for construction, staff will return to the PRC for an update and recommendation to proceed to Council for construction authorization.

FISCAL IMPACT

Project costs, including preliminary design, play equipment purchase, installation, and site work, will be funded through a private donation by a Larkspur family.

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for modifications to the Dolliver playground to create a Tot Zone play area and for staff to proceed with preconstruction efforts to this end.

Respectfully submitted,

Rita Schoch, Public Works Administrative Analyst II

Attachments

1. [Copy of Dolliver Park Survey](#)
2. [Public Noticing of Dolliver Park Survey](#)
3. [Results of Dolliver Park Survey](#)
4. [Preliminary Design for Dolliver Playground Modifications](#)