

Provo residents request recreation area

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Topic Our Towns

Parents of several burgeoning Provo neighborhoods say a lack of accessible parks has left children playing in streets, parking lots and miniature back yards.

"Provo is greatly blessed with the number of parks we have, but as growth continues we are starting to fall short in those areas where there have been population shifts or there's new development going on," said Roger Thomas, Parks and Recreation director. "Those are the areas we need to start focusing on."

The city adheres to national guidelines that recommend a neighborhood park of at least 4 to 8 acres within a half-mile of residents, and a larger community park -- up to 60 acres -- within 1.5 miles. The standard for a neighborhood park is 2 acres per 1,000 people in an area. But residents in the high-density locations with scant vacant land say even a "pocket park" beats the streets.

Laura Haacke was single when she started lobbying five years ago for a park in the Spring Creek neighborhood. Now it seems her two babies could be riding bicycles by the time it materializes. After failing to negotiate the purchase of three adjacent lots totaling 3 acres, Haacke now is pursuing a vacant lot of less than an acre.

"We don't need a really large park. That parcel right there is actually perfect," Haacke said, envisioning a playground and picnic pavilion with some open grassy areas along 1140 South at 950 East. "It's smaller, but it's very large for a kiddy park or pocket park. It would fill our needs for the neighborhood."

Bicentennial Rotary Park is the closest existing park, across State Street and about a mile from Haacke's home. The city Parks and Recreation staff conceded Spring Creek's need, and several years ago Provo granted \$50,000 in community development block grants to help realize the original 3-acre proposal. As yet, however, city officials have been unwilling to disregard guidelines so far as to develop a 3/4-acre pocket park.

Meanwhile other park standards are neglected. The Joaquin neighborhood, with 15,000 residents, should have at least 30 acres of park space, according to national and city guidelines. It has 7 acres. And its Memorial Park, with green space and memorials but no playground or picnic tables, is geared toward veterans rather than the hundreds of children. Many of Joaquin's residents are low- to moderate-income young families with one car, unlikely to walk and unable to drive to distant playgrounds in other areas.

"We are way under where we are supposed to be," said neighborhood chairman Kurt Peterson, who has campaigned for more than three years to develop even a small park. "When you're dealing with an existing developed area, what else can you do? We'll never find five acres for a park in downtown Provo."

In addition to finding suitable, affordable property, the design, development and maintenance costs for a new park are often prohibitive. Provo tries to develop parks with as much in-house resources as possible to lower costs, but nonetheless Thomas estimated development costs from \$60,000 to \$100,000 per acre, depending on its amenities. The tiny pocket park Haacke envisions for the Spring Creek neighborhood would cost roughly

\$250,000, including property acquisition.

The new park impact fee, collecting money off development since Provo implemented it last spring, should ease the financial burden. It's hasn't provided a ton of money, but is scheduled to gradually increase over the years. The next parks slated for development are above Foothill Boulevard and in northwest Provo near the proposed elementary school.

For now, Thomas is bound to the size guidelines for new parks, though city officials have discussed compromising those where need merits. He said the city and neighborhoods must get creative as they play catch-up in developing adequate park space.

"I commend those neighborhoods because they are growing and they do need parks, but it's very hard to meet the standards," he said. On small pocket lots, "It's just so condensed there's not a lot you can do. But is that better than nothing? I guess that's something the community has to answer."

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